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ABSTRACT

The production and understanding of humor calls for a specific competence. It appears that second language learners fail to develop this competence even when they reach native-like proficiency levels. A review of the literature suggests that the notion of humor competence in second language learning has not been examined. Humor competence can be considered the fifth component of the theoretical framework for communicative competence. It involves knowledge of the semantic mechanisms of humor, grammar, discourse rules, communication strategies, social norms of language use, and world knowledge. As with the other four competencies (grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse), humor competence contains elements that are transferred from the first language and vary from learner to learner. Capacity, the ability to actualize knowledge, also varies from competence to competence within an individual, but the capacities for each competence are interrelated and interact with each other as do the competencies. Because capacity involves psychological factors such as personality and intelligence, learners achieve different levels of proficiency and overall communicative competence. Individual humorous responses and output vary widely. Additional research on humor competence in this context is needed. (MSE)

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HUMOR COMPETENCE: THE FIFTH COMPONENT

One morning I walked into my office and found one of my officemates cracking up. She handed me a comic strip and remarked "Isn't it great?" I read it twice carefully, looked up, and asked her what was funny about it. Most of us who speak a second language have undergone this kind of frustration, feeling dumb or even embarrassed at not getting the joke, or disappointed at one of our jokes falling flat. But, what is it that makes humor in a second language such a hard, almost unattainable goal?

Analyzing the joke with my officemate, I realized that there were several elements that prevented me from understanding the joke. Some of them were at the grammatical level such as the double meaning of a word, and some were cultural references; i.e. at the level of world knowledge.

My first supposition was that because I had learned the language during the period in which the audiolingual method was in vogue, I had not been exposed to a classroom situation in which the underlying principle was language for communication. Yet, by carefully observing highly proficient speakers of English (most of them considered almost nativelike by native speakers) who had been in communicatively-based programs, I noticed that they showed the same handicap.

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Evidently, second language learners are not provided with the necessary knowledge and exposure to become competent in the understanding and production of humor. There is some aspect of their communicative competence that is not being developed through the process of instruction. This assumption poses three questions: what in the second language competence remains to be developed, why, and how.

The production and understanding of humor calls for knowledge of the semantic mechanisms of humor which, when they come into play, combine knowledge from diverse spheres ranging from grammatical competence to world knowledge. In other words, it requires a competence. It is this specific competence--humor competence--that learners seem to fail to develop even when they reach nativelike levels of proficiency.

After a careful analysis of studies in humor research (Chapman and Foot 1976, Wilson 1979, McGhee 1979, McGhee and Goldstein 1983, Raskin 1984, Apte 1985) and theories of communicative competence in second language pedagogy (Munby 1978, Canale and Swain 1980, Canale 1983, Savignon 1983, Stern 1983, Bachman 1987), I have become aware of the fact that the notion of humor competence in second language learners has not been considered yet. This explains why none of the theoretical frameworks for communicative competence put forth thus far seem to acknowledge the presence of humor competence in the notion of communicative competence.

This paper will explore the notion of humor competence in

second language learners and propose a more comprehensive framework that includes this notion. The main objective of this study is to bring into light the existence of humor competence in second language learners and create an awareness of its importance in the development of the learners' overall communicative competence.

The theoretical framework for communicative competence proposed here is a construct that brings together Canale & Swain's model (1980), Canale's later modification of the model (1983), and Widdowson's notion of capacity (1983).

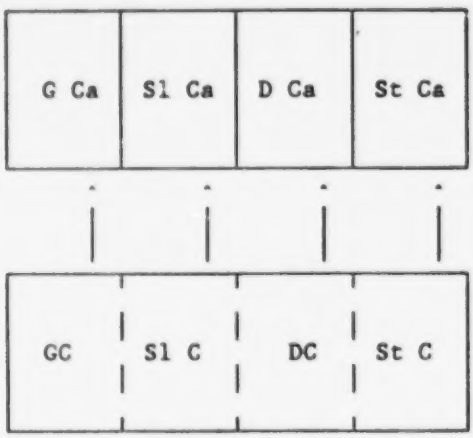

Figure 1

There are two aspects in the proposed framework: on the one hand, grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence; and, on the other hand, capacity;i.e. the ability to actualize this knowledge.

GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE concerns the knowledge of vocabulary, rules of morphology, phonology, spelling, sentence formation, and semantics.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE is the knowledge of the social

rules of language use.

STRATEGIC COMPETENCE consists of the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal strategies, e.g. paraphrase, circumlocution, that can be used either to make up insufficient knowledge in one or more of the other competencies, or limiting factors in the actualization of knowledge (fatigue, distraction).

DISCOURSE COMPETENCE refers to the knowlege of discourse rules in a language.

CAPACITY or ABILITY FOR USE is the ability to actualize knowledge. There is a capacity component for every competency. This aspect is not included in any of the competencies because it is a notion that is related to psychological factors such as personality and intelligence. These features are subjective;i.e. they vary from person to person, and they may affect the overall communicative competence resulting in different levels of proficiency.

The four competencies presented thus far are at the core of the theory of communicative competence put forth by Canale & Swain and later reexamined by Canale. In both versions the 1980 and 1983, these scholars point out that the areas of competence distinguished serve to illustrate what communicative competence minimally includes. Therefore, their theoretical framework can be considered open to further developments in areas they have not researched yet. One of those areas in which there has been little research is the production and understanding of verbal humor.

A review of the latest communicative approaches for the

teaching of ESL (Munby 1978, Krashen 1982, Terrell 1982, Stern 1983, Savignon 1983, Omaggio 1986) reveals that they basically focus on the development of communicative competence for learners to engage in what Grice defines as bonafide communication; i.e. in an earnest, serious, information-conveying mode. However, language users deal with non-bonafide communication such as lying, play-acting, and joke telling as well.

It is true that learners do not need a competence different from the one they have in their first language to lie or play-act and that current methodologies include the role play technique which involves lying and play-acting. In fact, play acting is not a vital element for successful communication while humor is a relevant form of social interaction. More importantly, humor is an essential part of our communicative competence that allows us to communicate effectively.

Raskin (1984) characterizes humor as a "universal trait...partly human and partly acquired" (2), based on the findings of researchers of children's humor such as McGhee and Wolfenstein. Most of these scholars have come to the conclusion that children cannot express or understand verbal humor till they begin to discern the different levels of ambiguity in language. Humor requires a competence.

Humor competence can be defined as the knowledge that enables a language user to produce and interpret "a text which is compatible with two opposite scripts which, in turn,

fully or in part overlap" (Raskin 99). The text of a joke describes a certain "real" situation and evokes another "unreal" which does not take place and which is fully or partly incompatible with the former. It is this incompatibility that renders a text funny.

These incompatibilities/oppositions may involve various levels or aspects of language sound patterns, morphology, syntax, or semantics; or they may refer to sociocultural elements or aspects of world knowledge, or they may result from the combinations of all of these. In light of Canale and Swain's framework for second language learners, humor competence translates as partaking of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence.

According to Raskin's script based theory of humor, there are five factors in a verbal joke:

[1] A switch from bonafide mode of communication to the non bonafide mode of verbal jokes.

[2] The text of a joke.

[3] Two (partially) overlapping scripts compatible with the text.

[4] An oppositeness relation between the two scripts.

[5] A trigger, obvious or implied, realizing the oppositeness relation (140).

[2], [3], [4], and [5] are directly related to discourse competence, grammatical competence, and sociolinguistic competence.

For learners to make a verbal joke, they need to produce

a coherent-cohesive text so that the listener/s can interpret it and find it funny. Conversely, in order to interpret a verbal joke, the learners need to comprehend the global meaning of the text so as to follow the sequence of the joke. Discourse competence is the aspect of knowledge that permits them to carry out such intellectual activity.

A verbal joke may present opposition at the level of grammar. When a joke carries two scripts that point to lexical, phonological, and syntactic ambiguity, learners have to resort to their grammatical competence to be able to understand and/or produce the joke.

Also, verbal joke may evoke two scripts that are incompatible in terms of appropriateness of language use. A text may be cohesive and coherent though inappropriate in the context of situation.

Sociolinguistic competence enables learners to distinguish between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in a text both in production and interpretation of discourse. It is important to notice that sociolinguistic competence provides humor competence with knowledge in two different spheres.

On the one hand, knowledge of the social rules of language use permits learners to deal with appropriateness of language use within the text of the joke. On the other hand, it helps learners to discern whether they can switch into the joke-telling mode in a given sociocultural situation, i.e. whether it is appropriate to come up with a

joke according to the topic, participants, and situation involved in the communicative event. Humor with its manifold functions enhances communication. Notwithstanding, if it is not used appropriately, it can turn into a dangerous weapon. It can cause misunderstanding and, thus, hinder communication.

For the sake of clarity, the discussion so far has presented the relationship between humor competence and each of the competencies separately. This does not entail that humor competence interacts with each of them at a time. When interpreting or producing a verbal joke all three competencies come into play as well as world knowledge and strategic competence.

World knowledge or encyclopedic knowledge is what language users know about the world they live in and what is not internalized by virtue of their knowing the meaning of words and of the ways the words can be combined together (Raskin a 92). In humor, world knowledge is a key element. It is present in all jokes regardless of their type (e.g. ethnic, political, sexual). For second language learners, knowledge of the culture--an aspect of world knowledge--in which they can use the language is fundamental. Many jokes rely on cultural aspects.

(7) What's the most popular yuppie program in Alaska?

10W 30 Something.

(7) has become one of the most popular jokes in the United States in the last two months. The interpretation of this joke requires knowledge in different aspects of world knowledge:

a) Knowledge of the oil spill disaster in Alaska.

b) Knowledge of the program "30 Something" which portrays the life of two yuppie couples.

c) Knowledge of what being a yuppie means in the American context.

d) Knowledge of the acronym 10W 30 which stands for a type of oil for cars.

b) and c) are clearly culture dependent elements that are at the core of the joke. Second language learners could never understand and let alone produce this joke by themselves if they are not acquainted with the American culture. Moreover, they need to be updated on the latest news about the United States.

However, language learners can resort to communication strategies such as appeal for assistance to interpret this particular joke. Strategic competence also interacts with humor competence. Interestingly enough, there is a two way relationship between these two competencies. There are many verbal and non-verbal strategies that help learners to create and understand humor. By the same token, a verbal joke can be a good strategy to achieve communication. A wisecrack, a pun, and even a personal funny anecdote may be used to

illustrate or underscore a point that the learner wants to make.

Humor competence integrates knowledge from grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and world knowledge. It seems safe to assume then that humor competence in second language learners is not developed until they have acquired a certain level of competency in all of these components. Because there is no research in this area, to my knowledge, it is not possible to determine how much knowledge of grammar, discourse, strategies, and/or social norms of language use learners need to start developing a humor competence in the second langauge. Neither is it feasible to establish how many culturally related scripts, in addition to the fictional stereotypes, they will need to have acquired before they can produce and interpret humor.

Fictional stereotypes are indispensable elements in the notion of humor competence. They are culture bound, and they are the basis of most ethnic jokes. Ethnic jokes involve specific scripts and oppositions that are not part of the speaker's semantic competence, nor are they part of the speaker's knowledge of the world. They have to be acquired separately from linguistic competence and in this sense, they are similar to encyclopedic knowledge. But, on the other hand, they capture stereotypes which are at best very crude approximations of reality (Raskin 180).

Internalization of these scripts is very important for

the production and understanding of verbal humor. These scripts are part of the knowledge that pertains exclusively to humor competence.

The same as the other competencies, humor competence contains elements that are transferred from the first language. Most of them vary from learner to learner depending on their linguistic and cultural background. The semantic mechanism of verbal humor is certainly one of those transfers. Regardless of their background, learners are bound to construct jokes in the same way; i.e. a text with two opposite scripts.

Thus, humor competence can be considered the fifth component of the theoretical framework for communicative competence proposed in this paper. It is the knowledge that enables a learner to produce and interpret verbal humor. It involves knowledge of the semantic mechanism of humor, grammar, discourse rules, communication strategies, social norms of language use, as well as world knowledge.

The following diagram is an attempt to illustrate the place of humor competence with respect to the other competencies and world knowledge in a more theoretically complete model of communication.

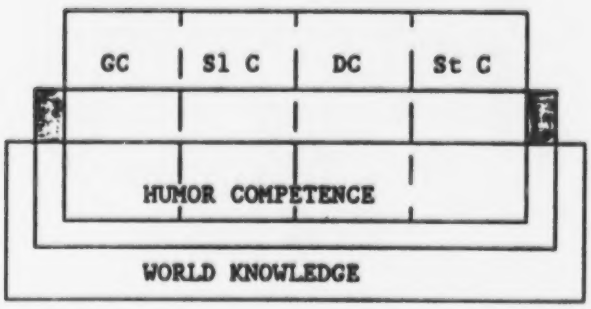

Figure 2
Components of Communicative Competence and World Knowledge

Figure 6, grammatical competence (GC), sociolinguistic competence (Sl C), discourse competence (DC), strategic competence (St C), and humor competence make up communicative competence. The broken lines indicate the channels of interaction among the components of communicative competence, and between the components and world knowledge. The shaded areas represent those aspects of humor competence that are not shared with any other competency; i.e. that belong exclusively to the domain of humor competence such as semantic mechanisms of verbal humor.

Capacity

The notion of communicative competence has two aspects:

knowledge and capacity. In the preceding sections, the aspect of knowledge, which is made up of five components--grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, humor competence, was fully discussed. It is now time to turn to the aspect of capacity.

In the context of the theoretical framework proposed here, the notion of capacity stands for actualization of knowledge. It is the ability to "realize schematic knowledge as communicative behaviors" (Widdowson 41) by exploiting the resources for meaning in a language. In other words, it is what enables speakers to use the language creatively in actual communication.

Capacity is not a single, independent entity. It is the ability that actualizes a particular knowledge; therefore, there is a different ability for use for each of the components of the aspect of knowledge in the notion of communicative competence,viz grammatical capacity (G Ca), discourse capacity (D Ca), sociolinguistic capacity (Sl Ca), strategic capacity (St Ca), and humor capacity (H Ca). Although each of these abilities is specifically related to one competency, they are all interrelated among themselves. They interact with each other in the same way competencies do.

The notion of capacity involves psychological factors such as personality and intelligence, which may lead learners to achieve different levels of proficiency. In the case of humor capacity, sense of humor is a variable that affects

capacity and, in turn, the overall communicative competence. Some people are more willing and find it easier to switch into the joking mood than others. This does not mean that they have less knowledge to produce and interpret verbal humor. It is their sense of humor that inhibits their ability for use. People tend to find different things funny and therefore their individual humorous responses as well as their humorous output vary widely (Raskin 2).

The theoretical framework for communicative competence put forth in this study encompasses knowledge and capacity in five dimensions which intersect with the notion of world knowledge. Figure 3 should then be amended as follows

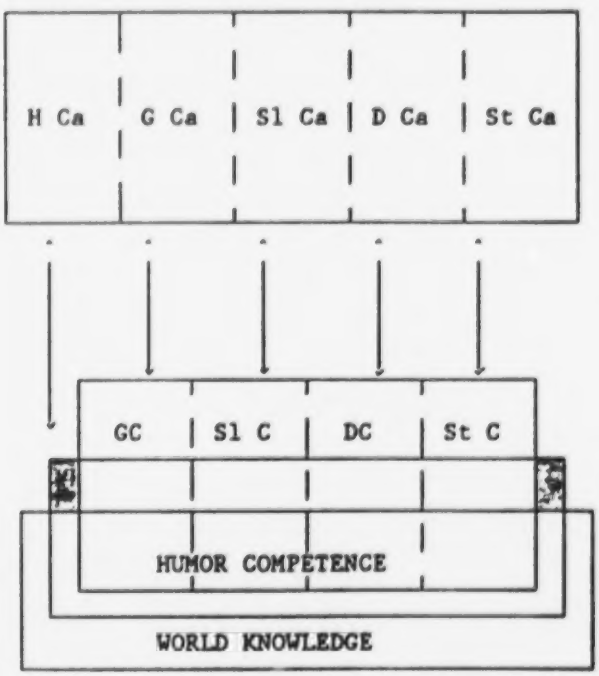

Figure 3
Proposed Framework for Communicative Competence

This figure tries to show the different components that compose communicative competence and the relationships among them. It is the purpose of this diagram to clarify graphically the theoretical framework proposed so that it becomes clear the place of humor competence in the notion of communicative competence.

There are still many questions that need to be answered with respect to the notion of humor competence in second language learners. Further research is underway; thus, it is possible to assume that answers will be found in the near future.

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